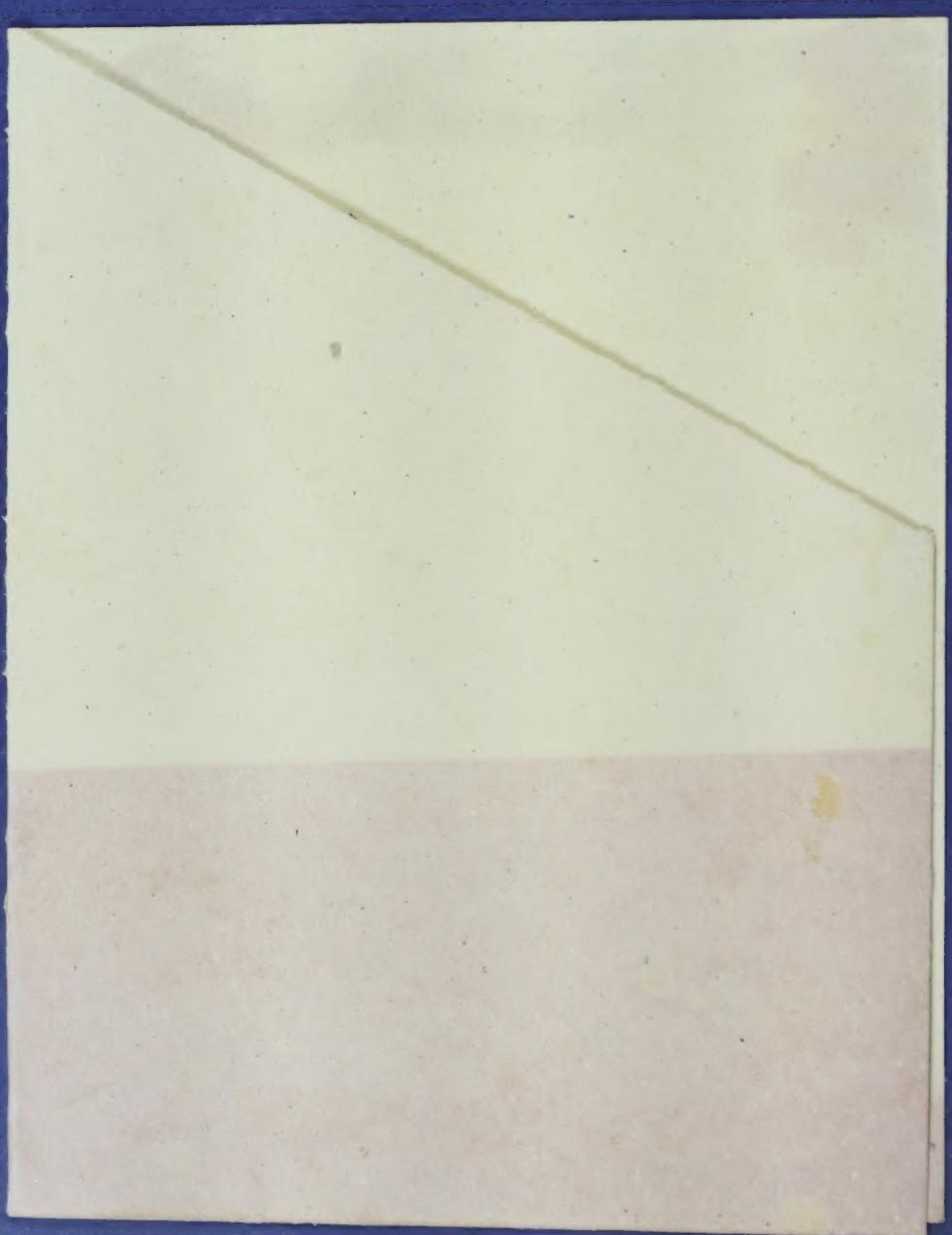


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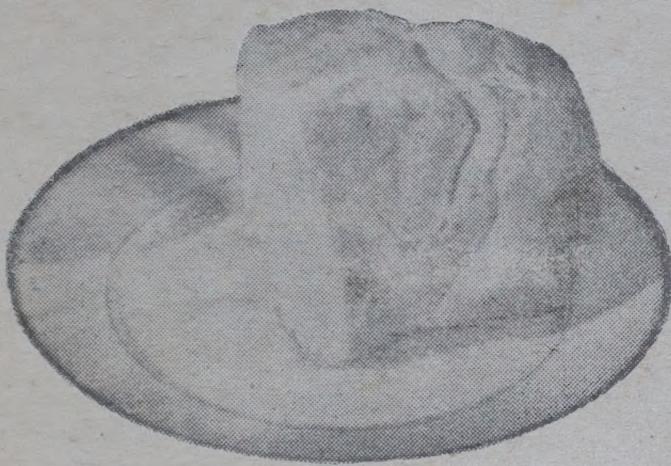
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GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR!

the social implications
of the message of Jesus

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Good ^{Ind} News to the Poor!

The Social Implications of The Message of Jesus

We live today in a world of the very poor. Of the 645 million inhabitants in India today, some 247 million live on or just above the poverty line (that is they can just afford to buy the minimum food they need to live a normal human life); while some 247 million more are below this line and cannot even afford this minimum. Only some ten million or so are adequately housed, clothed and fed. Such poverty leads of course to massive mal-nutrition. Possibly 70% of the people of India are undernourished, both qualitatively and quantitatively: they lack not only the special KINDS of food (proteins and vitamins), but even the minimum amount of food (1500 - 2000 calories a day) necessary for healthy growth and functioning. So some 500,000 children succumb each year to disease brought on by severe mal-nutrition, and perhaps 60% of all children in India between the ages of three and five suffer from some form or other of retarded growth. The price that has to be paid for such poverty in terms of hunger, weakness, impaired ability for sustained work, diminished resistance to disease, retarded intellectual growth, to say nothing of the daily heartbreak of those who must watch helplessly while those they love hunger, sicken, wither away and die, is truly frightening.

Do we in this grim situation of savage and dehumanizing poverty dare to proclaim the message of Jesus as 'Good news to the poor,'? Jesus apparently expects us to do so. He Himself claims in the gospel of Luke (4, 16-21) that he has been anointed by the Spirit precisely to proclaim the good news to the poor; he refers to this proclamation of good news to the poor as the clearest indication of his messianic identity, (Lk. 7, 18-23) and he solemnly announces that the poor are blessed, because the kingdom of God which he has come to proclaim is truly and exclusively theirs (Lk. 6, 20-26). How then are we to understand these astonishing sayings of Jesus? Who are the poor he is proclaiming blessed? Is he thinking of the spiritual poverty of detachment from material and consumer goods, or of the oppressive poverty of destitution we have spoken of above? How are the poor blessed? What is the 'good news' that is being proclaimed to them?

These are complex questions and any answer at all adequate would have to take into account Jesus' attitude to riches too. For

his almost obsessive preoccupation with the dangers that riches bring (of Mt. 6, 19-24; Mk. 10, 17-27; Lk. 12, 16-21; 16, 19-31) is the obverse side of the proclamation of good news to the poor (Lk 4, 16-21; 7, 18-23; 6, 20-26). We shall survey very briefly, them (focussing mainly on Mark 10, 23-27) Jesus' warning against riches, before going on to explore at some length (through a detailed study of Lk. 4, 16.21 and Lk. 6, 20-26) what exactly Jesus meant when he announced that he had been sent to proclaim the good news to the poor.

A. THE DANGER OF RICHES

1. How hard for the rich

That attachment to, indeed the mere possession of, riches can be an obstacle to following him is affirmed repeatedly by Jesus in the Gospels. Just how great an obstacle they can be is shown by the story of the Rich Young Man (Mk. 10, 17-22) who for all his high principles and irreproachable conduct (10, 20) is deterred from following Jesus simply because he cannot tear himself from his, large property (10, 22). Not even the sign of affection which Jesus gives him (10. 21) can persuade him to give away his possessions to the poor and experience the exhilarating liberation of a life lived in total freedom from attachment to consumer goods and in loving dependence on God.

So important is the lesson of this story that Mark has made it explicit by adding to the story a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples (Mk. 10, 23-27) in which this lesson is emphatically spelled out and proclaimed as a general principle applicable to all. The dialogue probably composed by Mark from one or more genuine sayings of Jesus has been skillfully structured to bring out the relevant point.

Mark 10, 23-27

- A. And Jesus looking around said to his disciples, "With what difficulty will those who have riches enter the Kingdom of God"
- B. And the disciples were amazed (ethambounto) at his words. But Jesus said to them again,
- A. "Children how difficult it is for those who have trust in riches to enter the Kingdom of God"
- C. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God"
- B. And they were exceedingly astonished (perissos explessonto) and said to one another,

"Who then can be saved?"

Jesus looking up at them said,

A. "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God".

The dialogue obviously follows a roughly concentric pattern centering on the striking hyperbolic saying of v. 25. Jesus comments twice, in almost identical words, on the danger of riches (v 23&24 b) only to meet each time with the incredulous astonishment of his disciples (v 24 & 26). His concluding reassurance (v 27) introduced with the same reference to 'Jesus looking' as his opening comment (v 23) brings the dialogue to its appropriate close.

The saying in v 25 about a camel passing through the eye of a needle is thus the structural and thematic centre of the dialogue and expresses in a single striking image, all that the dialogue has to say. In its fanciful, almost grotesque imagery, the saying is quite typical of Jesus, who delights in such flights of fancy (Mk. 8, 35; 9, 43; Mt. 10, 34; 15, 14). Attempts to water it down by suggesting for instance that the 'eye of a needle' was the name given to a small gate in the walls of Jerusalem (a detail first mentioned in a 9th century commentary), or that the word Kamelos (camel) in the Greek text of Mark be read Kailos (ship's rope), miss the point, for this saying of Jesus is meant to be exaggerated and fanciful. It deliberately juxtaposes the largest known animal (the camel) with the smallest known opening (the eye of a needle), in order to shock its hearers into a stunned awareness of the unpalatable truth that riches are an insuperable obstacle to salvation. "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God"- that is, the salvation of a rich man is (humanly speaking) impossible.

2. God and Mammon

Just why should riches be for Jesus so great an obstacle to salvation? Putting together his many sayings on the subject, one could suggest the following two reasons :

- 1) Riches make a man Godless. The accumulation of wealth leads to covetousness or greed (pleonexia) and the covetous man spends his life piling up treasure on earth, to the total neglect of treasure in heaven (Mt. 6, 19-21). That is the rich man ceases to have values other than the pursuit of the material comfort and the power that his money brings. He is like, and indeed is, the Rich Fool of Jesus' parable (Lk. 12, 16-21), preoccupied wholly with the piling up of material resources that will enable him to "eat, drink and be merry" for many years to come. Like him the man who is rich soon forgets the pointed warning of Jesus (so startlingly relevant to

our consumer society today) that the security (and quality) of a man's life is not measured by the abundance of his possessions, (Lk. 12, 15). God ceases to have a place in his life. He becomes a practical atheist, and so in biblical parlance, a "fool" (aphron) for it is the fool, the psalmist tells us, who "says in his heart, 'there is no God' (ps. 14, 1)".

2. Riches make a man heartless too, insensitive to the needs of his fellowmen. This seems to be at least one of the lessons of the puzzling parable of the Rich Man and the Beggar in Lk. 16, 19-31. As the parable now stands it has two clearly distinct and possibly originally independent parts, each with its own particular point.

If the Second part of the parable (v 27-31) warns against a craving for "signs" by pointing out how even the testimony of a dead man come back to life again would not convert someone who has been deaf to the Scripture, that is, to the normal vehicle of God's revelation; the first part (v 19-26) again affirms the exclusion of the rich from the Kingdom—this time because of their massive neglect of the poor.

For the parable begins with a nicely balanced description of the sharply contrasting conditions of an unnamed rich man, clothed in fine linen and feasting sumptuously every day (16, 19); and of a poor beggar named Lazarus, who lies at his door, covered with sores and hungering for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table (16, 20-21). And it then goes on to tell of the dramatic reversal of their condition, that takes place when they die (16, 22-26). Not only is the beggar carried to paradise while the rich man roasts in hell, but their respective roles have been precisely reversed. For it is the desperately thirsty rich man who now looks longingly as the once starving beggar feasts contentedly at Abraham's table.

Clearly, then, this sudden and dramatic reversal of roles is the main point of this first part of the parable, which is best understood as an attempt to arouse the listeners of Jesus to an awareness of the drastic revision of values, (Lk 6, 20-26) which the eruption of the Kingdom must inevitably bring. But the parable teaches another lesson too. Implicitly at least it draws our attention to the rich man's unfeeling neglect of the poor beggar at his door. None of Jesus' audience would have missed this. For to a Jew a rich man dining sumptuously every day with a starving beggar at his door would have been "the very epitome" of an anti-social behaviour clearly and repeatedly condemned by the Law. The parable suggests, then,

though it does not explicitly say so, that the rich man was condemned to hell because of his large neglect of the poor. It thus becomes a forceful warning against the callous insensitivity to which riches can lead.

So riches are for Jesus an insuperable obstacle to the Kingdom because they make a man Godless and heartless. They monopolize his attention, become his over-riding value and lay hold of his 'heart' for "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt. 6, 21). The dreadful inhumanity that this can lead to has been well described, by Dom Helder Camara, Bishop of Recife in North Brazil :

I used to think when I was a child that Christ might have been exaggerating when he warned about the dangers of wealth. I know better. Today I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of freezing people's hands, eyes, lips and hearts

Riches are deadly. That is why Jesus affirms with such uncompromising firmness against every desperate evasion of affluent Christian living in our consumer capitalist society and striving mightily to make the best of both worlds, that "no man can serve two masters...you cannot serve both God and mammon" (Mt. 6, 24).

B. THE CHALLENGE OF THE POOR

Jesus' uncompromising stand against riches (but not against the rich)—that is against an attachment to or even the possession of superfluous wealth as source of comfort and power—is balanced by his equally intransigent commitment to the poor—(but not poverty)—that is to all those who are deprived of the material and social goods needed for an authentically human life. Such a commitment to the poor is proclaimed by Jesus as the essence of his mission in the inaugural sermon with which (Luke's Gospel) he begins his public ministry (Lk. 4, 16-30) and its significance is spelled out with great force and clarity in the set of beatitudes with which (again in Luke's Gospel) he opens his great public discourse, the Sermon on the Plain (Lk. 6, 20-26). It is through a study of these two texts, then, that we shall come to know Jesus' attitude towards poverty and the poor.

1. TO PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR (Lk. 4, 16-30)

Luke begins his narrative of Jesus' ministry with the description of a solemn inaugural sermon delivered by Jesus in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth (Lk. 4, 16-30); and he describes this not

just as the first act of a crowded preaching tour, but as an inaugural act. The sermon at Nazareth launches the ministry of Jesus and gives us its meaning. For it is the occasion of a stirring manifesto through which Jesus announces his own understanding of his mission, and proclaims the significance of all that he is to do.

Attending the Sabbath service of the synagogue (as he had so often done before) Jesus stands up to read and is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolls it to the oracle of Is 61, 1-3, and reads out the moving words in which Trito-Isaiah announces his prophetic calling. He then hands back the scroll to the 'attendant' of the synagogue and sits down to expound the text he has just read. And then into the expectant silence of the waiting congregation of his townsfolk whose eyes are all "fixed intently" on him, he announces with the force of a thunderclap: "this day this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". (4, 20).

The proclamation is startling. For what Jesus tells his audience is that at that very moment, even as they listen to him, the salvation announced (but not decisively effected) by Trito-Isaiah is in fact being realized. Even as he speaks the age of God's definitive salvation begins to dawn. The real spirit-filled herald of the good news to the poor is thus not the prophet of five hundred years ago, but Jesus himself, who, having just received the fulness of the spirit at his baptism (Lk. 3, 21-22), now declares Trito-Isaiah's mission to be his own.

The scope of the mission which Jesus assumes is as startling as the proclamation that it has now begun. For the manifesto which he makes his own (Lk. 4, 18-19) is formulated in language of astonishing earthiness and actuality, Jesus announces his task that of 'evangelizing' (proclaiming the good news of liberation to) the poor, of heralding freedom of captives, sight to the blind, liberty to the oppressed; and so of inaugurating a time of salvation prefigured by the Jubilee Year of Old Testament legislation, when debts were to be remitted, ancestral property returned, and slaves set free (Lev. 25, 8-17; 25-28). His is thus a social manifesto with little that is 'spiritual' about it. Indeed its social thrust is intensified by the deliberate changes the Lukan Jesus makes in the Old Testament text he quotes.

For in quoting Is 62, 1-2 Jesus uses, not the original Hebrew text but its 'official' Greek translation, the Septuagint (LXX) which at Is. 61, 1 b has, like Luke, "recovery of the sight to the blind" in place of the "opening of prison to those who are bound" of the Hebrew. And Jesus quotes the LXX with two significant changes in the text. A half verse ("to bind up the broken hearted") is

left out from Is 61, 1: and another ("to set free the oppressed") is added from Is. 58, 6.

Lk. 4, 18-19

The spirit of the Lord is upon me
Because he has anointed me.
To announce good news to the poor he has sent me;
To proclaim to prisoners freedom
And recovery of sight to the blind
To set the oppressed free
To proclaim (keryxai) a year acceptable to the Lord

Is. 61, 1-2 (LXX)

The spirit of the Lord is upon me
Because he has anointed me.
To announce good news to the poor he has sent me;
To heal the broken hearted;
To proclaim to prisoners freedom
And recovery of sight to the blind
To declare (kalesai) a year acceptable to the Lord

These changes can scarcely be fortuitous. Luke at Is. 61, 2 has "proclaim" (keryxai) instead of the LXX's "declare" (kalesai) an acceptable year, obviously because the pressure of Christian terminology, in which 'to proclaim' (keryssein) has become a much used technical term for the proclamation of the 'good news'. The omission of the "broken hearted" from Is. 58, 6 are probably intended as preventive measures against the kind of spiritualizing interpretation of a text which has led to Mathew's religious rendering ("Blessed are the poor in spirit") of Jesus' originally strongly social beatitude ("Blessed are you poor"). Commentators have been slow to recognize this, but it is difficult to see why else Luke should have omitted the one line in Is 61, 1-2 ("to bind up the broken hearted") open to such spiritualizing and have brought in an expression from Is. 58, 6 (' to set free the oppressed') whose strongly social thrust is plain.

Given, then, the setting of Is. 61, 1-3, an oracle addressed originally to the miserable poverty stricken remnant of Judah, freshly returned from exile; the socially oriented directives of the Jubilee Year of Lev 25 to which the prophecy expressly refers; and Luke's deliberate effort to forestall through his editing any spiritualizing of the text-there can be little doubt that the manifesto of Jesus in Lk. 4, 18-19 is to be understood in a strongly social sense. The salvation Jesus announces here is primarily a liberation from the pressures of social, economic, and societal oppression. He has come indeed to announce 'good news' to the poor!

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Scholars are largely agreed that this inaugural sermon of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk. 4, 16-30) is a Lukan composition which Luke has fashioned by rewriting Mark's story of the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (Mk. 6, 1-6) and by combining it with other traditions known to him. Yet, inspite of the fact that concern for the poor is a peculiarly Luken theme, the social thrust of this manifesto of Jesus is not just a Lukan interpretation. Luke is here reflecting the intentions of Jesus himself. For the same 'social' understanding of his mission (in terms of Is. 61, 1-3) is to be found in other sayings of Jesus which are certainly genuine—notably in Jesus' reply to the question posed by John the Baptist about his identity in Lk 7, 18-23; Mt. 11, 2-6; and in the beatitudes with which Jesus begins his 'sermon' to the crowds in Lk. 6, 20-26; Mt. 5, 3-12. It is in these beatitudes in particular that the extent and significance of Jesus' commitment to the poor become clear.

2. HOW HAPPY THE POOR! (Lk. 6, 20-26)

Lukes' Sermon on the Plain opens with a set of four beatitudes (and four corresponding woes) of which the first three form a close knit group, differing conspicuously from the fourth and last beatitude in Luke, and significantly from their parallels in Mathew too.

Lk. 6, 20-23

20. Blessed are you poor for yours is the Kingdom of God
21. Blessed are you that hunger now for you shall be satisfied
Blessed are you that weep now for you shall laugh
22. Blessed are you when men hate you and when they exclude you and revile and cast out your name as evil on account of the Son of Man.
23. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven for so their fathers did to the prophets

Mt. 5, 3-12

3. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
4. Blessed are those that mourn for they shall be comforted
5. Blessed are the meek for they inherit the land
11. Blessed are those that hunger and thirst after righteousness for yours is the kingdom of heaven
12. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and speak all kinds of evil against you falsely, on my account.
12. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The fourth Lukian beatitude (6, 22-23) obviously differs from the other three. It is repetitive and wordy, and refers so clearly to a problem of the post-Easter community (the expulsion of Jewish Christians from the synagogue), that it is almost certainly a composition of the early Church. The first three beatitudes on the other hand, with their crisp rhythmic style and their strongly prophetic content are utterly characteristic of Jesus and are certainly his authentic words. They are in fact more likely to be the authentic utterances of Jesus than their parallels in Mathew 5, 3-6. For appearances suggest that it is Mathew who is secondary, for he has :

- a) Spiritualized the three original beatitudes of Jesus by changing "poor" into the 'poor in spirit' (5,3), by toning down "you that hunger now" into 'those who hunger and thirst after righteousness' (5,6) and by replacing "you who weep now" (i.e. who gives concrete and external signs of distress) with the more abstract and spiritual "those who mourn" (5,4);
- b) has rearranged the beatitudes in the order (poor-mourn-hungry) in which their key words occur in Is 61, 1-3;
- c) has added a fourth beatitude in the first (5,5) by recasting Ps 37.11 ("the meek shall inherit the land") into a beatitude form so as to get the two sets of 4 rhythmic beatitudes each with which he begins his Sermon on the Mount.

In the first three Lukian beatitudes then, we hear the authentic voice of Jesus himself-though it is possible that Jesus spoke them in the third person (as in Mathew) rather than in 'you' form which Luke gives. For the O.T. beatitudes and woes are normally in the third person (of Ps 1,1; 31,1; 41,1; Is 5, 8-12); and Luke's 'you' could well be an editorial adaptation restricting the beatitudes to the particular Christian community for which he wrote. But whatever their grammatical form, it is clear that the three beatitudes of Luke are not meant to be three independent proclamations-as though the poor, the hungry and the weeping whom Jesus successively addresses were three distinct categories of people; or as though the blessing of the 'kingdom' were different from the promise of being 'filled' (at the messianic banquet) or the hope of 'laughing' (with messianic joy). The three beatitudes are in fact expressions of a single beatitude the Jesus-beatitude : "Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God".

a. Who are the Poor

What then does this beatitude mean ? who are the 'poor' whom Jesus calls 'blessed' ? Just why are they called 'blessed' ? In what exactly does their blessing consist ? The Greek text of Luke's first

beatitude reads, *makarioi hoi ptochoi*, (blessed the poor) whose *ptochos* suggests not just poverty but destitution. For unlike the milder *penos* (poor) which describes a man who has no property, lacks superfluities, and has to work for his living, *ptochos* (destitute) designates one who lacks even the necessities of life and must beg in order to live. The 'poor' 'in Jesus' beatitude it would seem, then, are, those who are utterly needy, desperately in want; so that one would be tempted to formulate the Jesus beatitude as: "Blessed are the destitute, for theirs is the Kingdom of God."

But it is doubtful whether Jesus himself meant quite this. For he spoke in Aramaic, not in Greek. And the Aramaic 'inwanayya' or 'inwtanayya' that he must have used (more familiar to us no doubt in their Hebrew forms of 'anniyyim or anawim' would have had a much broader connotation. It would have stood for all those who were in any way oppressed, and so reduced to a condition of diminished worth or capacity. So the 'poor' addressed by Jesus would have included not only the economically strained (the destitute) but also the socially outcast (the tax collectors and sinners of MK. 2, 15-17 or LK. 15, 1-2), the religiously simple and unlettered (the 'little ones' of Mt. 18,10), the mentally ill (epileptics and 'demoniacs' like those in MK. 9, 14-29 and 5, 1-20), and the physically handicapped (all the blind, deaf, the crippled, the sick shown flocking to Jesus in MK. 1, 32-34; 3, 7-12; 6, 53-56), whose sufferings would have been accentuated by the shame and guilt resulting from the then prevalent belief that their illness or deformity was a punishment for sin (Jn 9,2). In a word the 'poor' for Jesus comprised the 'amme ha ares' ('the peoples of the land') elite of his time labelled the rabble ignorant of the law', that is, the poor, the unschooled, the socially unacceptable, the religiously defiled, the sick.

In post-exile times the term 'anawim' began to acquire a religious connotation and was used to describe the pious and faithful Israelites ('the poor of Yahweh'), whose poverty and helplessness had taught them to rely absolutely and exclusively on God. Echoes of this development resonate doubtless in Jesus' understanding of the 'poor' and these have been taken up and explicit in Mathew's "poor in spirit" (Mt. 5,3). But the primary reference of Jesus' beatitude is surely not religious but social. The Jesus beatitude is the beatitude of the oppressed.

So among the "poor" addressed by the Jesus beatitude today we shall find the Harijans, daily victims of inhuman atrocities and of an utterly dehumanizing discrimination practised against them (incredibly!) even in allegedly Christian communities. We shall find too the pavement dwellers of our slum-ridden cities, who have literally no place where to lay their heads, the crippled beggars who

swarm around us at our bus stops and railway stations; and the vast masses of our landless labourers, who like the spades in shed, eke out a twilight existence in hopelessness and exhaustion. These are the people whom Jesus calls 'Blessed'.

b. Why are the Poor Blessed ?

But why does Jesus call them blessed ? Surely not because their poverty is in itself a good thing. Poverty is sometimes hailed as a blessing (usually by those who are reluctant to share in this 'blessing' themselves) because it is said, it makes man spiritually docile, open to God. It is the poor man, keenly aware of his helplessness who turns trustingly to God. This may be true of spiritual poverty, the non-attachment to material things which Jesus demands as a necessary disposition for salvation. But that oppressive poverty, which is ultimately dehumanizing, as a religious value may be doubted. Jesus certainly never proclaims it has such. Rather he proclaims the poor 'blessed', not because their poverty is a good thing, but precisely because it is an evil which he is about to bring to an end. The poor are blessed because they are to be poor no more "blessed are you that hunger now for you shall be filled". The poor, that is, are blessed because they are to be the beneficiaries of the total revolution (blessed are you poor-woe to you rich) that the Kingdom of God will bring.

Behind the proclamation of Jesus lies a whole Old Testament tradition of God's predilection for the poor. Because he is King charged with the protection of the weak the God of the Old Testament champions the case of the poor and the oppressed, who are the victims of an injustice which the just God must redress. So innumerable passages in the Old Testament speak of Yahweh's concern for the defenceless - exemplified by the widow, the orphan and the refugee, types of utter hopelessness in a pre-welfare-age society (Dt 10, 17-19; Ps 68,5) and of his vindication of the oppressed of the earth (Ps 76,9; 146, 5-9). And because Yahweh is concerned about the poor, he demands with deadly earnestness (Ex 22, 21-24) a similar concern from his people (Dt 24, 17-18; Jer 7, 5-7 Ps 82, 1-4) and from their King (Jer 22, 1-5); and he condemns through his prophets every kind of oppression with violent anger (Amos 2, 6-8: 4, 1-3; 6, 4-7; 8, 4-10; Hos. 2, 1-3; Mic 2, 1-3; Is. 3, 13-17; 5, 8-10; 10, 1-4; Jer. 5, 26-29; 34, 17-21; Ezek. 34, 1-24). Israel's oppression of the poor will lead, warns Amos, to a famine of "hearing the words of the Lord", that is, Yahweh's total abandonment of his people (Amos 8, 11-12). To 'know God' proclaims Jeremiah, is to practise 'justice' (Jer 22, 13-17). A cult that becomes an alibi for neglect of the poor, say Isaiah (58, 6-9) and Hosea (6, 6,), is wholly unacceptable to God.

C. What is the blessing promised to the poor?

The Jesus beatitude is the concentrated expression and the crowning of this long tradition of God's concern for the 'poor'. In it Jesus announces that through him God is at work (the kingdom has come!) reaching out to liberate the oppressed of the earth. The liberation he proclaims is not to be spiritualized away, as though those who are poor now on earth will be 'rich' in heaven. Such a 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die' interpretation fails to do justice the strongly this-worldly character of the kingdom which Jesus proclaims. For the kingdom is, after all, God's intervention into history.

Rather that which Jesus promises is God's revelation, which will liberate all men (both the rich and the poor) from the whole range of oppressions personal and societal that constrain and diminish them. It will free men not only from the dehumanizing structures of an oppressive poverty which grinds them down; but equally from the compulsion to possession and power which lead men to oppress one another. For Jesus has not come to make the 'poor' rich, and turn the oppressed into new oppressors. He intends rather to bring about both a change of heart (freedom from attachment to riches) and a change of structures (liberation from oppressive social systems); for it is this combination alone that can lead to the new humanity which is the ultimate goal of the long process of total liberation that Jesus has begun.

To the extent then, that the Kingdom of God comes; to the extent that is, that we are open to the liberating revelation of God's unconditional love in which the kingdom ultimately consists; to the extent that we are prepared to live by the values of Jesus and commit ourselves to the building up of the kind of community of freedom and fellowship that he envisioned-to that extent spiritual poverty (destitution) will vanish from our lives (Rev 21, 1-4). For in a community that is truly Christian there can be no greed and no destitution, as the experiment in Christian living attempted by the Jerusalem community ("and there was not a needy person among them") clearly shows (Acts 2, 44-45; 4, 32-35).

The existence of consumerism and destitution among us is thus a measure of the failure of our Christianity. The fact that there should be rich (and greedy) Christians in a hungry world is a towering scandal which no amount of private devotions or much publicized almsgiving can take away. For ultimately our greed is a sign of our godlessness; and the presence of the destitute in our midst, the mark of our infidelity to Jesus. God has set himself squarely against mammon (Mt 6, 24); and in a paroxysm of concern, Jesus has identified himself with the poor (Mt 25, 31-46). Our consumerism then, is an option against God; our neglect of the poor is a neglect of Jesus.

QUESTIONS

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Read carefully Mt 5, 3-12 and 6, 19-24

Mk 10, 17-24

Lk 4, 16-21 and 6, 20-26

- 1 What is the attitude of Jesus towards riches ?
- 2 What is the central message of Jesus' teaching ?
Who are the 'poor' He speaks about ?
- 3 Does Jesus exalt destitution and oppression promising a happy future in the other world ?
- 4 Why are the poor blessed and what is the blessing promised to them ?
- 5 In keeping with Jesus' central message what should be the orientation of AICUF and the life-style of an AICUfer ?

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